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AUTHOR Combs, Martha
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ABSTRACT

As a result of a telephone survey of 100 experienced elementary and secondary teachers concerning their comfort with computers and the teaching of writing skills, a weekend workshop was designed to help teachers develop some confidence in their skill as writers and to explore the possibilities available when writing with a word processor. The first evening, workshop participants were surveyed as to their attitudes about computers, the writing process, and themselves as writers. The participants then became acquainted with an Apple IIe by working through a short tutorial program that taught the basic operations and keyboard functions. Next, teachers participated in a brainstorming session and their ideas were recorded with a word processing program. When participants indicated satisfaction with the ideas generated they were shown how to save their prewriting ideas on their own disks and how to print a hard copy. The next day revisions were made and the instructor continued to model conferencing techniques. An attitude survey at the close of the workshop revealed that participants felt greater confidence in themselves as writers. As a follow-up, participants completed two additional writing activities using a microcomputer and responded to an attitude survey, reporting a continuing use of the skills gained in the workshop for both personal writing and working with students. (HOD)

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Exploring the Composing Process with Microcomputers

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Martha Combs
Department of Curriculum & Instruction
Oklahoma State University

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EXPLORING THE COMPOSING PROCESS WITH MICROCOMPUTERS

In this age of technology, teachers are being encouraged, if not mandated, to incorporate computer literacy skills into the curriculum so that students will be prepared to deal with great quantities of information in a rapidly changing world (Papert, 1980). At the same time, deficiencies in writing skills exhibited by many students on such tests as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, (NAEP, 1977) has lead to a renewed emphasis on writing as a process and not merely a product or a series of exercises. Educators, who are interested in both computers and the writing process, suggest that the microcomputer may be one of the best tools available to aid in the development of effective writing skills (Cronnel & Hume, 1981; Bradley, 1982; Green, 1984; Watt, 1984).

As a teacher educator, the writer is concerned about the demands placed upon inservice educators to respond to the ever expanding curriculum of our schools. Many new areas of study are being added to the curriculum for which teachers must seek additional training, such as computer literacy, because their teacher preparation programs did not address such areas. The writer believes that teachers cannot effectively teach what they do not know or feel confident about themselves.

Therefore, the writer suggests that before schools begin to implement effective writing programs teachers should first be given ample opportunity to develop confidence in their own abilities to write. The microcomputer, with the addition of a word processing program, could make this task more effective.

Teachers, Computers, and Writing

To determine teachers' comfort level concerning computers and the teaching of writing skills, a telephone survey of 100 experienced elementary and secondary teachers in our state was conducted. The survey yielded some interesting results.

In the area of microcomputers, 100% of the teachers indicated that their school had at least one computer and that they were encouraged to become familiar with it. Through inservice training or college courses, 81% had some training in the operation of a computer. As far as actual usage in the classroom, 72% reported some usage which was usually restricted to drill and practice or game-type software. However, only 24% reported feeling comfortable in directing students' use.

In the area of composition, 93% reported that students were given writing assignments to complete, but only 22% taught writing as a process. The remainder indicated that writing was taught as separate language skills, such as grammar, then students were given assignments to which they were supposed to apply the learned skills. The teachers had not received specific training in the teaching of writing skills. Only 14% of the teachers wrote for personal pleasure or felt comfortable with themselves as a writer. Of the entire sample only 9% of the teachers utilized a microcomputer as a tool for writing either personally or with students. The majority of teachers surveyed had not considered the microcomputer as a tool for teaching writing to students, but 76% indicated an interest in exploring the possibilities.

Attending to Teachers' Needs

Based upon this survey, the writer designed a weekend workshop that was intended to help teachers develop some confidence in their skill as writers and explore the possibilities available when writing with a word processing program. This workshop was built upon the belief that teachers will take a more active role in new aspects of the curriculum, when they feel comfortable and confident about the subject. The writer also realized the limitation inherent in the weekend time frame, but felt that some exposure was more beneficial than no exposure.

Workshop--Day One

Beginning at 6:00 p.m. one Friday evening, participants gathered in the computer laboratory of our college. The instructor surveyed each participant as to his/her attitudes about computers, the writing process, and the individual's view of self as a writer. Then the participants each became acquainted with an Apple IIe by working through a short tutorial program that taught the basic operations and keyboard functions.

With the survey and the tutorial completed, participants were led in a brainstorming session to generate ideas related to the pros and cons of state-mandated competency tests, which were soon to be adopted by our state. Their ideas were recorded using a language experience approach on a large screen monitor. The instructor recorded their ideas using Bank Street Writer, a rather simple word processing program which is accessible in many schools.

Ideas were first generated as a simple list displayed on the

large screen. As the list grew, participants made suggestions that called for a reorganization of ideas. An outline seemed more appropriate for the ideas generated, so the group began to suggest ways that the ideas might be rearranged to communicate the group's ideas more clearly. With the use of the "tab," the list became a three level outline. During this activity the participants were actively involved in the rehearsal/planning phase of writing.

To learn the operation of Bank Street Writer, participants then were shown how to reproduce the outline on their own monitors, until all necessary commands were familiar. They were then encouraged to add to, delete, reorder, or revise the group's ideas so that the remaining ideas reflected their own feelings about the issue of competency testing. This activity served two purposes. The writers actively participated in the first step in the writing process and through practice they became aware of the ease with which text could be manipulated.

During this rehearsal/planning time, the instructor circulated and modeled an "over-the-shoulder" conferencing technique. As Graves (1984) suggested not only did the instructor listen to the participants respond to their ideas but also asked questions that would help the writers clarify and evaluate their own work.

When participants indicated satisfaction with the ideas generated they were shown how to save their prewriting ideas on their own disk and how to print a hard copy. Our first session concluded at 9:30 p.m., as the writers took the printed copies of their ideas to reflect upon in anticipation of the composing that would take place the next day.

Workshop--Day Two

The next morning, at 8:00 a.m., we gathered again in the computer laboratory. Some participants were ready to begin the next step in the process, composing text. They were shown how to load their outlines from the night before, if needed. Some writers chose to load the outline and begin composing by expanding the ideas into paragraphs. Others had made manual changes from the night before and wanted to revise the outline before continuing. Still others chose to work from the printed copy of the outline as they began to compose paragraphs. The instructor called the group's attention to the variety of ways in which writers had chosen to begin, emphasizing that writers need choices for completing a task.

A portion of the participants wanted to continue discussion of the competency issue to gather additional information to improve the accuracy of their writing. The instructor responded by providing some reading materials on the issue and called the group's attention to the occasional need for additional reading that writing, especially expository text, often requires. Reading helps writers father new information, in addition to allowing time to confirm or refine old ideas.

At periodic intervals throughout the morning, the instructor asked the writers to save their text as it was at that point. Each save was given a separate designation. The periodic saves would be retrieved later so that each writer could study their own composing and revising behavior. Periodic saving of text allows one to note changes in style, organization, sentence

structure, etc., when several pieces of the same text are compared. This is a unique aspect of writing with a microcomputer and is not available to writers using traditional methods such as paper and pencil or typewriter.

For the remainder of the morning, the instructor continued to model conferencing techniques which serve as a key to helping students improve in the expression of their ideas and the application of specific language skills. As Graves (1983) suggested, writing conferences should create a comfortable environment, encourage students to initiate questions, focus attention on only one or two specific aspects of the work at a time, encourage experimentation, demonstrate solutions, and help writers develop the vocabulary to talk about the act of writing. The participants were also encouraged to "conference" with each other, providing feedback if it was desired by another.

As the final revisions were made that morning, each text was printed in its final form. In addition, each partial piece that had been saved was also printed for examination. Each participant was asked to look for patterns in their own writing style. The large screen was again used, as the group discussed individual style and the process they felt they used to generate this particular piece of text. The instructor recorded their impressions as members discussed their image of "self as writer." The merits of multiple saves for student writing were discussed. On this note, the group adjourned for lunch where the conversations about writing continued.

The afternoon served as a debriefing session. The intention

was to apply what had been learned about word processing and the writing process to the reality of the classroom. The total group created a "job description" for the teacher who wishes to teach the process approach to writing. Teacher behavior during each of the phase was discussed. The ideas generated came from the participants experiences with writing during the workshop, the behaviors modeled by the instructor and past experiences recalled as a result of the involvement the participants had with personal writing. Unlike other workshops the participants had attended, they were not given handouts with all of the "how to" ideas already generated. The participants actually generated their own materials for "how to" teach writing.

Realizing that student computer time may be limited in many classrooms, task groups were created to brainstorm "off-line" activities that students could do that might simulate their "on-line" time with the computer. These activities would be necessary to keep interest high during the times when students would not be able to write using the word processing program. Writing the draft on every other line for easy revising, cut and paste techniques for reorganization, sentence combining for making text more precise and clear, semantic mapping or semantic feature analysis to help students make a visual picture of their ideas, and expanding kernel sentences for increasing description and interest were just a few of the suggestions. The ideas were then shared with the total group.

At the close of the workshop, the participants responded to another attitudinal survey. They compared these responses to

to their initial reactions from the night before. Their feelings about themselves as writers showed greater confidence. They reported a strong desire to apply their ideas to the classroom. The instructor believed that it would be important to personally follow up with each participant to encourage continued use of the workshop ideas.

Following Up

As a follow up to the workshop, the participants were asked to complete two additional writing activities using a micro-computer. The activities could be with their own student but had to involve personal writing. They also had to describe, in detail, the process utilized, in addition to personal and/or student reactions to the activity. Retaining the awareness of of their feelings of self as a writer was considered important.

Since the completion of the final activity, each participant has been contacted. At least 90% of the participants reported a continuing use of the skills gained in the workshop, for both personal writing and working with students. They also reported a continued, more confident view of themselves as writers.

This writer believes that observation of the workshop participants further supports the notion that teachers must first feel comfortable with a task before they can effectively work with students. Just as with students, teachers need time to grow and develop new skills before they are called upon to utilize them for instruction. We would not think to ask a student to be tested over a new concept that was just introduced. Why then should we expect teacher to teach "with expertise" a newly

acquired skill? Like students, teachers must be allowed to go through developmental stages with new skills.

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